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ABSTRACT

This brief booklet gives information concerning acts of bigotry in Los Angeles County and offers suggestions for combatting them when they occur. In the area studied, the actions have been largely directed against Jews and Blacks with a few incidents concerning Hispanic Americans and Asian/Pacific Americans. The booklet suggests that these actions are frequently motivated by the following causes: (1) a downturn in the economy; (2) increasing population diversity; (3) presence of a large Jewish population; (4) neighborhood tensions between people of different racial or religious backgrounds; (5) activity of hate groups; (6) psychological problems of an individual; and (7) deep-seated, underlying prejudices. The booklet notes that most of the apprehended perpetrators of these crimes are under 20 years of age. The booklet suggests immediate actions to take in the event of an act of vandalism, such as giving community support to the victim, urging the victim to report the crime to the police, and organizing the neighborhood to meet and discuss the incident and assist the victim in repairing the damage. The suggestions for long range actions include: (1) formation of a special task force or human relations council; (2) creating liaison with city authorities and police to monitor the situation; (3) getting advice on security measures for likely target spots; and (4) recruiting the support of the religious community to fight the problem. The suggestions for preventing these acts of bigotry generally involve trying to build positive intergroup relations using schools, religious organizations, civic groups, and local government. (CG)

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HOW TO COMBAT
ACTS OF BIGOTRY
IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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I. THE PROBLEM

In the San Fernando Valley in the early 1980's an elderly Jewish couple returned from vacation to find the interior of their home vandalized. The more than $20,000 of damage included broken windows, ripped drapes, ruined carpets, smashed appliances and broken dishes. And anti-Semitic graffiti was spray-painted on the walls. In the San Gabriel Valley a Black family received telephone threats and racial insults. These were followed by two incidents. First, trash was dumped in their back yard and ignited. Three days later a tree on their front lawn was set on fire. In recent years other minority persons in various sections of Los Angeles County have been physically assaulted, had their homes vandalized, and been victims of arson. In many cases there was clear evidence that the attacks were motivated by racial or religious bigotry.

The Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations has documented such incidents since 1980. The typical incident involved spray-painting of anti-Semitic or anti-Black graffiti on the exterior of private residences or institutions identified with a particular racial or religious group. There have also been some acts against Latinos and Asian Pacific persons.

Documentation

During 1984 the Human Relations Commission documented 13 racially motivated incidents and 70 religiously motivated incidents in the County. This total of 83 incidents compares with only 26 in 1980 and 65 in 1981 (a high of 116 was reached in 1982). The Commission believes that many other incidents occurred during these years but were not reported.

Victim Reaction

Even in the cases where vandalism is limited to anti-Semitic or racist graffiti, the impact on the victims is often devastating. They may feel anger, terror, a sense of isolation and abandonment by their neighbors and community.

Locations

No region of the County is immune to such acts. During 1982, 1983 and 1984 communities experiencing incidents included Palos Verdes, Lancaster, San Dimas, Claremont, Santa Monica, Playa Del Rey, Alhambra, Glendora, Culver City, Arcadia, South Pasadena, Long Beach, Whittier, Glendale, San Gabriel, Hacienda Heights, Lakewood, Covina, West Covina, Beverly Hills, Norwalk, Carson, Torrance, Pasadena, San Marino, West Los Angeles and many parts of the San Fernando Valley. Acts of racially or religiously motivated vandalism and violence may strike anywhere in the County at any time.

II. THE CAUSES

Although no one can be certain why most of these incidents happen, several theories have been offered. A combination of them may bring us as close as we can come to answering the question, "Why?"

Economic Conditions

A rise in such incidents often coincides with a downturn in the economy. Competition for scarce jobs or other economic resources could intensify existing prejudices.

Changing Population

The County population is becoming increasingly diverse. These changes are threatening to some persons. From all indications this trend will continue as more immigrants arrive.

Presence of a Large Jewish Population

One reason for the high number of anti-Semitic incidents may be the fact that the County's Jewish population is one of the largest in the world. Their sheer numbers and high visibility may be at least a contributing factor. This, of course, does not explain the complex causes of anti-Semitism.

Neighborhood Tensions

A dispute between neighbors of different racial or religious backgrounds can sometimes escalate into an incident of this type. Also, though less frequently encountered than in earlier years, a minority family moving into a neighborhood may be faced with such acts.

Hate Groups

The activity of hate groups is directly responsible for some of the incidents.

Psychological Problems

Sometimes the cause of an incident can be traced directly to an individual's emotional disturbance or mental illness. It appears this was the case a few years ago when one man set fire to a Buddhist temple and several churches.

Underlying Prejudices

Unfortunately there are persons in our communities who have deep-seated prejudices against certain racial, ethnic and religious groups. For reasons we don't always understand these feelings rise to the surface at times and may be expressed in acts of bigotry.

III. THE PERPETRATORS

We cannot be certain who commits most of these acts, because only a small percentage are caught. The typical incident occurs late at night and the victim does not discover the vandalism until hours later. We do know, however, that the majority of those who are apprehended are young persons under the age of 20. Frequently, they live near their victims. The Ku Klux Klan, the Nazis and other hate groups apparently are not directly responsible for most incidents. Groups of this type, however, do commit some of these crimes. Members of one such group were convicted of arson in a major fire at a synagogue in the County. No matter who commits the act the emotional shock experienced by the victim is usually the same.

IV. THE REMEDIES

When this type of bigotry strikes in your community there are actions that can be taken immediately. There are other actions that will contribute to the solution over the long term and still others that are preventive.

Immediate Actions

- Give support to the victim. The trauma of the incident can be reduced by your making personal contact with the victim to give assurance that the community does not condone and will not tolerate such acts. Whether you are a city official, representative of a civic or religious group or a neighbor, your support can go a long way toward reducing the victim's feelings of isolation and helplessness.

- If the incident is reported in the media it is important for local officials and other community leaders to speak out forcefully against such bigotry. Setting this tone in the community can reassure the victim and other minorities, and serves as a warning to the perpetrators.

- Urge the victim to report the incident to the police if this has not been done.

- Request extra police protection in the neighborhood. Sometimes incidents are repeated at the same location.

- Call a neighborhood meeting. This is particularly appropriate if there is any indication that the perpetrators live in the immediate area. Such sympathetic support from neighbors can mean a great deal to the victim and can demonstrate neighborhood solidarity against such acts.

- Organize a work party to paint out graffiti and repair vandalized property. This can be a very practical way to assist victims

and is particularly suited to persons who have difficulty in putting their feelings into words.

- o Establish a "Neighborhood Watch" type of group in cooperation with the police. This is of special value in neighborhoods where there have been repeated incidents.

- o Report the incident to the County Human Relations Commission, (213) 974-7611, and groups such as local fair housing councils and the Anti-Defamation League that provide services to victims and their communities. The County Human Relations Commission will assist if there is no local group providing services. The Commission also needs to know about all such acts in order to monitor and report on incidents County-wide.

- o Should the media be informed? Authorities disagree on this question. Some feel that more public awareness would make it easier to combat the problem. Other authorities, however, believe media coverage often leads to imitative or "copycat" acts. If the media do report such incidents of bigotry they should be urged to do so in a nonsensational and sensitive manner.

Longer Range Actions

- o If there are several incidents in your community you may want to form a Mayor's Committee, a special task force, or a community human relations council. Such groups should be representative of community leadership and the ethnic and religious diversity in the community. The group can help discover

the causes of the incidents, assure victim support, develop countermeasures and educate for positive intergroup relations.

- Even without a group as described just above, it is still essential to search out any triggering causes that may exist. This responsibility goes beyond the criminal investigation conducted by the police and may need to involve local government officials or civic leaders. If triggering causes exist they must be uncovered and dealt with.

- Because it appears that the perpetrators of these acts are often teenagers it is vital to develop human relations courses and programs in the schools.

- Some person in city government should be assigned responsibility for monitoring all incidents, reporting regularly to the Mayor and City Council; and acting as a liaison to victims, the police, and concerned community groups and agencies such as the County Human Relations Commission. This person should also facilitate the City's participation in remedial and preventive measures.

- Police departments, in some instances, have not taken racially and religiously motivated vandalism seriously. Many have, however, and it is essential that they do so. Even small departments may be able to provide at least one officer who has the training and sensitivity to specialize in such cases. Information about racially and religiously motivated vandalism and violence should be

incorporated in the police department's regular training program. If police do not take these incidents seriously the perpetrators may interpret police inaction as permission to continue such criminal behavior.

- o If there have been repeated anti-Semitic incidents the police department should alert its personnel and take preventive measures on Jewish holidays and at any other special events.

- o If police are the first to learn about an incident it is vital that they refer the victim to an agency that can provide other types of assistance.

- o Advice on security measures should be provided to religious institutions, homeowners, businesses and other victims (or potential targets). Exterior lighting, fencing, secure locks and watch dogs can be effective deterrents. Information on these and other security measures should be available from the police department (see Appendix for guidebook on security for community institutions).

- o The religious community is a natural ally for city officials and civic leaders who wish to promote positive intergroup relations. Religious groups will often be among the first to participate in community human relations programs and many conduct related educational programs for their own congregations. Their active support should be sought.

- o The County Human Relations Commission conducts training workshops on dealing with ra-

cially and religiously motivated vandalism and violence for clergy and other interested community groups. Contact the Commission about this program and other resources the Commission can recommend.

- o The Human Relations Commission has spearheaded the development of a network of groups that are working on this problem. Some of these groups represent resources for your community (see Appendix). If a special group forms in your community it may wish to consider joining the network.

Prevention

A word about prevention. One of the most effective ways to prevent incidents of bigotry is to create positive intergroup relations. This requires the conscious efforts of all segments of the community working together. There must be good communication between minority communities and local government, including the police. The schools, religious institutions, civic groups and local government leaders should take the lead in educating for good human relations. Minority persons should be made to feel welcome to participate in all phases of community life. Potential perpetrators will find the climate in such a community inhospitable to acts of bigotry.

APPENDIX

Resource Organizations

ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE OF B'NAI B'RITH
6505 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90048
(213) 655-8205

FAIR HOUSING COUNCIL OF THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY, 6511 Van Nuys Blvd., Ste. 20, Van Nuys, CA 91401 (818) 781-6940

HOLLYWOOD-WILSHIRE FAIR HOUSING COUNCIL,
6565 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90028
(213) 464-1141

JEWISH FEDERATION COUNCIL, COMMUNITY RELATIONS COMMITTEE, 6505 Wilshire Blvd., Ste. 802, Los Angeles, CA 90048 (213) 852-1234

LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS, 1184 Hall of Records, 320 West Temple Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012
(213) 974-7611

METRO-HARBOR FAIR HOUSING COUNCIL,
25234 Frampton Avenue, Harbor City, CA 90710
(213) 539-6191

WESTSIDE FAIR HOUSING COUNCIL,
10835 Santa Monica Blvd., Ste. 203, Los Angeles, CA 90025 (213) 475-9671

Publication on Security

The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, listed above, has published Security for Community Institutions: A Guidebook (June 1984).

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